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Super-Flexibility Interview I & II

In **Super-Flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation** (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, **Homa Bahrami** and **Stuart Evans** present a crossfunctional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately reinventing knowledge enterprises.

Part I of this interview is focused on the theory behind, and the conceptual foundations of, superflexibility. Part II of the interview focuses on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies and teams can become superflexible.

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Super-flexibility Interview

Part I: Theory—What is Super-flexibility?

with Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans



In *Super-Flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation* (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans provide a “toolkit” to help organizations and teams become “super-flexible” in a dynamic world. They define “super-flexibility” as the capacity to transform by adapting to new realities, underpinned by the ability to withstand turbulence by creating stable anchors. Based on 25 years of field research, advisory work, and professional experience in Silicon Valley, Bahrami and Evans present a cross-functional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately re-inventing knowledge enterprises. Part I of this interview will focus on the big picture, or the

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theory behind, and the conceptual foundations of, super-flexibility. Part II of the interview, published in the following issue, will focus on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies or teams can become super-flexible.

1. What does “Super-flexibility” mean and why did you coin the phrase?

Our goal in writing the book, and teaching the concepts in our executive seminars and

graduate programs, is to give knowledge workers and business leaders a diagnostic toolkit for succeeding in a dynamic world. In essence, super-flexibility is the capacity to change course, transform, evolve, and reinvent—like a chameleon changing its color. At the same time, super-flexibility is not just about transformation and reinvention; it is also about the capacity to withstand turbulence, to bounce back, and to stay the course, like a camel surviving in desert con-

ditions. In practice, it means engaging in a delicate balancing act: deciding what to keep and how to stay the course on the one hand, and deciding where to make swift and sudden changes in order to address new realities, on the other hand.

Our doctoral field research was conducted in European multinationals. When we came to Silicon Valley in the early 1980s, the contrast was startling. Because this place is all about dealing with dynamic reality, we became interested in how entrepreneurial companies dealt with technological innovation and market uncertainty. We realized that Silicon Valley was, and is, an ideal research lab for studying adaptation. Young companies are not impacted by active inertia and can experiment with new recipes. We coined the term “super-flexibility” to describe what we have observed during the last 25 years in Silicon Valley.

2. How does “Super-flexibility” differ from other terms like flexibility, agility, versatility, etc.?

“Flexibility” is a polymorphous concept. It has different meanings depending on the context, and has been the focus of research in several disciplines. For example, the term “ambidexterity” is used in strategic management to describe how an entity can be innovative yet leverage its core business. “Agility” is used interchangeably with flexibility in supply chain management and software engineering. In child psychology and ecology, the term “resilience” describes the process of bouncing back after sustaining damage. In biology, scientists refer to “plasticity” to describe how a phenotype adapts to its unique environment. The term “super-flexibility” aggregates the different terms with a family resemblance into one overarching concept, and integrates these varied nuances.

3. In your book, you talk about how a company or organization becomes super-flexible through a super-flexible ecosystem, strategy, execution, organization,

and leadership. Can you talk more about these?

We discuss how a super-flexible **ecosystem** innovates through a process of “flexible recycling”. It can recycle talent, ideas, projects and most important of all, “failures” and reconfigure these in novel ways, with added ingredients. Recycling is also about cross-pollination, scanning actively, and learning from others. Yet, many business leaders are myopic and don’t have peripheral vision; they see the world through the lens of their own established businesses. Henry Ford got the idea of the assembly line by visiting slaughter houses. He saw how carcasses went through their own “assembly lines” and applied the principle to the auto industry. In our book, we discuss how recycling and cross-pollination catalyze the process of innovation in Silicon Valley.



A super-flexible organization is multi-polar, like a living organism with multiple brains, but these move in the same direction, like a flock of birds or a school of fish.

Instead of thinking about **strategy** as a single “best” approach, we argue that developing super-flexible strategies involves switching between a portfolio of initiatives. Business leaders have to “maneuver” their strategic trajectory, like changing gears in a car. In our book, we describe four types of maneuvers: pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective.

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Super-flexible **execution** is about deploying a scientific approach to getting things done, instead of being bogged down in “analysis paralysis”. We argue that dynamic execution requires clear intentions, targeted experimentation, openness to new data, fact-based assessment, and swift revisions. Our “Recalibration Framework” describes a phased approach to execution, and the three stages of experimentation, escalation and integration, as well as action steps along the way. The worst-case scenario is when you ignore factual feedback and adhere to the same recipe because you are intellectually and emotionally “attached” to it. We know several brilliant leaders who failed because they were not open to input that did not fit their own world views. The essence of recalibration is thinking like scientists—develop a hypothesis, gather data, experiment, prototype, iterate, learn, and even fail along the way.

A super-flexible **organization** is multi-polar, with several centers of gravity. It is much like a living organism with multiple brains, but these move in the same direction, like a flock of birds or a school of fish. Just like an individual, a super-flexible organization has three core building blocks—the “anatomy” (the accountability and reporting structure), the “personality” or its culture and identity, and most important of all, its “circulation” or

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how people interact and how information moves throughout the organization. The biggest challenge in a dynamic world is to monitor and synchronize the three building blocks, and make appropriate adjustments as priorities evolve.

Super-flexible **leadership** is about how to engage, guide, and collaborate with knowledge workers in dynamic settings. We believe effective leaders align their teams by using “peer-peer” rather than the traditional “parent-child” approaches. Peer-peer leadership, however, is not about abdicating authority and accountability. It’s about engaging in a delicate balancing act, by what we call “placing an iron hand in a velvet glove”.

4. How is this book different from other books on flexibility/change?

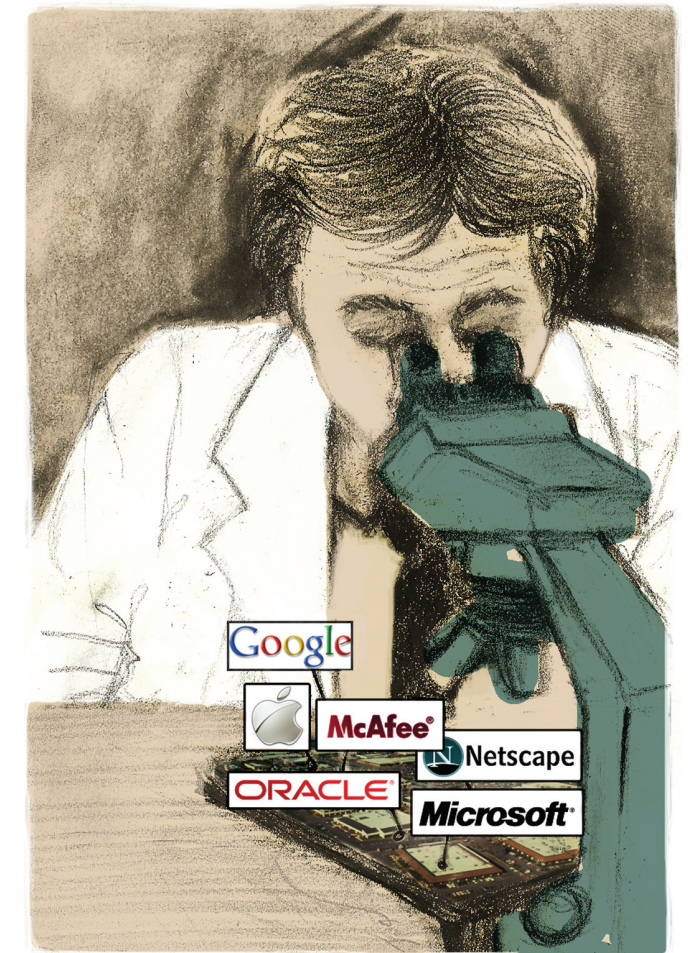
We present an “integrated” approach, spanning strategy, organization, leadership, execution, and innovation, and explore flexibility from the vantage point of different disciplines. We have also departed from the traditional “market” segmentation of popular business books. Our book is more like a handbook or a reference guide, filled with conversation starters, conceptual tools, and practical applications. Management teams need a common vocabulary and frame of reference, and a conceptual toolkit that can help them create a shared perception of morphing reality. We work with companies that are populated by knowledge workers, with domain expertise. They don’t want someone to tell them what to do. They want a “midwife” or a catalyst who can help them give birth to their own ideas. Once the conversation gets started, they come up with their own solutions. Readers should view our book more as a toolkit of conceptual frameworks that can help them start cross-functional conversations, diagnose complex situations, interpret their own experiences, and create a shared frame of reference, rather than a menu of best practices.

5. Who is your book and research trying to help or reach?

Our book is not only for scholars or for practitioners. We have tried to build a bridge between research and practice, making the book a “hybrid”. We hope to reach thoughtful knowledge workers who want to understand the conceptual roots of flexibility *and* its practical application.

Specifically, we target the individual, whether they are CEOs, C-level executives, general managers, project leaders, or knowledge workers. Our goal is to provide a toolkit to help knowledge workers navigate at different altitudes, from the trenches to the Boardroom. For example, a CEO can use our framework on “super-flexible organization” to assess the *entire company*; but, the same tool can be used by a project leader to diagnose a *team’s* effectiveness.

6. Given the current economic and likely future challenges, how important is it for a company or organization to be super-flexible?



It’s more critical now than ever. In today’s interconnected world, there’s a myriad of what we call “revision triggers”—technological, economic, geo-political, social, environmental, and cultural triggers. These triggers bombard companies, and prompt them to deviate from planned courses of action. There is also no slack in terms of time, resources, and bandwidth. Many knowledge workers understand that they need to be flexible, but don’t know how. Also, if you look at the new technologies unfolding, the cloud, virtualization, impact of social media and so on, there’s a massive shift in the way we do business and companies have to adapt to these developments. Given the multitude of revision triggers, we suggest you have to continually reconfigure yourself as an organization, a team, and an individual, to address the unfolding realities.

7. Why do you focus your book and research on “knowledge enterprises” only? Wouldn’t all companies benefit from being super-flexible?

The short answer is yes, absolutely! However, dynamic adaptation is especially challenging for knowledge enterprises because by definition, they face extreme forms of uncertainty: technology, distribution channels, global competition, legislation, speed of acceptance, and so on. Also Silicon Valley, which is full of knowledge enterprises, has been our research lab; it is where many of our ideas have come from.

8. What if a company or organization doesn't exist within an ecosystem like Silicon Valley or what if the company is based outside of the U.S. altogether? Or what if the company is a non-technology company like a consumer goods company?

Silicon Valley is a Darwinian, dynamic ecosystem where firms confront "extreme" forms of uncertainty. But this also makes them an excellent research lab for studying super-flexibility. It is like trying to understand music or fashion trends by observing teenagers. On the other hand, companies in Silicon Valley are the same as others. They design, build, and sell products to customers around the world and want to be profitable and satisfy their stakeholders. It may be difficult for a large global corporation to be like a Silicon Valley startup, but it doesn't mean that they can't learn from them and adapt the lessons to their own situations. In our book, we offer a menu and let people choose what is most relevant to them.

9. Is super-flexibility something that is teachable? If so, then why do so many companies seem stuck in their ways? And how do you get a company to change?

Yes, we think it is teachable and as educators, this has been our focus during the past decade. Our goal is to transform knowledge workers into enterprise clinicians. With the help of our toolkit, they can diagnose situations and devise appropriate solutions themselves. Many companies don't change effectively, because they wait until they are in a crisis mode, and then they bring in outside

experts who tell them what to do, so there is no skin in the game. Traditional interventions are like open-heart surgery, where the patient is in critical condition, has limited flexibility, and as a result, can experience high mortality rates. We believe in helping knowledge workers take *proactive* steps to solve their *own* problems. Our goal is to ensure that they can stay "fit" by having regular "check-ups".

It is important to know when and where you need to be super-flexible, and how much is too much.

10. Is there a point where companies are too "super-flexible" and don't stay on course or focus enough? Said another way, are there situations where companies might not want to be super-flexible?

Absolutely. It is important to know when and where you need to be super-flexible, and how much is too much. For example, our research shows that experimentation is critical when you embark on a new initiative, but you can't keep your options open forever. At some point, you have to escalate your commitment to a particular course of action or pull the plug. Our diagnostic frameworks try to provide a balanced approach, so you can assess when you put too many eggs in one basket, or are too flexible in one or another dimension.

In part II of this interview, authors and educators Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans discuss the "how" of super-flexibility, or how companies can put these ideas into practice. Stay tuned for more on this interesting topic in the next issue.

About the authors

Dr. Homa Bahrami is a Senior Lecturer at the Haas School of Business, University of Califor-

nia, Berkeley, a Faculty Director at the Haas Center for Executive Education, and on the Board of the Haas Center for Teaching Excellence. She specializes in organizational innovation and enterprise adaptation in dynamic, knowledge-based industries. She has published widely in leading journals, is the co-author of a major textbook (with Harold Leavitt, Stanford University) "Managerial Psychology: Managing behavior in organizations", published by the University of Chicago Press, and the co-author of "Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises" published by Springer in 2010. She serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and is active in executive education in the US and Europe.

Dr. Stuart Evans is a Distinguished Service Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Silicon Valley, where he teaches "Innovation & Entrepreneurship". He is a board member, educator and author, focusing on dynamic high tech ventures. His professional career spans research (SRI International, Stanford Graduate School of Business), consulting (Bain and Company, Menlo Park, California), investing (Sand Hill Venture Group, Menlo Park, California) and executive management (Shugart Corporation, a Xerox subsidiary, Sunnyvale, California). He has published widely on strategic flexibility, serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and mentors high tech entrepreneurs. He is the co-author of "Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises".

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Super-flexibility Interview Part II: Execution—How to Become Super-flexible

Interview with Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans



In Super-Flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises: A Toolkit for Dynamic Adaptation (Springer, 2010), authors and educators, Homa Bahrami and Stuart Evans present a "toolkit" to help organisations and teams become "super-flexible" in a dynamic world. They define "super-flexibility" as the capacity to transform by adapting to new realities, underpinned by the ability to withstand turbulence by creating stable anchors. Based on 25 years of field research, advisory work, and professional experience in Silicon Valley, Bahrami and Evans present a cross-functional general management toolkit for strategizing, organizing, leading, and ultimately re-inventing knowledge enterprises. Part I of our interview was focused on the big picture, or the theory related to super-flexibility. Part II of the interview focuses on the how, or the execution part of the equation and aims to answer how companies and teams can become super-flexible.

Entrepreneurial teams in Silicon Valley recycle talent, intellectual property, and failed companies. They often take a failed company and its key team members, incorporate a new company, cherry-pick the best intellectual property, add new ingredients, and restart it from scratch.

The authors address five inter-related topics: Super-flexible innovation, super-flexible strategy, super-flexible execution, super-flexible organisation, and super-flexible leadership. In this second interview, we focus on these core topics.

1. In your book, you talk about recycling as a critical aspect of innovation and the development of a super-flexible ecosystem and how Silicon Valley has a culture of failure. Can you talk more about how

others can learn from this?

Entrepreneurial teams in Silicon Valley recycle talent, intellectual property, and failed companies. They often take a failed company and its key team members, incorporate a new company, cherry-pick the best intellectual property, add new ingredients, and restart it from scratch. Companies can learn from these initiatives by having their own venture teams. They can monitor internal projects, blend it with outside capabilities, and re-configure new initiatives, even when

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a project has been a “failure”.

Moreover, business teams should conduct regular lessons-learned, or “post-mortems” in order to create a “recycling” culture. We’ve been inside a number of established companies, where project leaders are apprehensive to present bad results because they get branded as failures, and as such, may be demoted, stigmatized, or even fired. What if companies instituted regular post-mortems where teams *are expected* to bring out the good, the bad, and the ugly, as part of their regular reviews? And what if they leverage these sessions as opportunities to create new ideas or products? I don’t see many companies that use this simple lesson because our corporate cultures are obsessed with success.

2. In your chapter on Super-Flexible Strategies, you discuss another action principle, “maneuvering”, or how a company needs to “harness kaleidoscopic changes to make sudden left turns”. Can you describe how?

The maneuvering framework categorizes a company’s strategic initiatives in terms of four different types of dynamic action plans or what we call “maneuvers”: These are pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective maneuvers. Pre-emptive and protective maneuvers represent *offensive and defensive* moves anchored in the *future* (from an offensive viewpoint, if I had a clean sheet, what would I want this business to look like in a few years, and from a defensive standpoint, what is the worst case scenario and how should I guard against it). Exploitive and corrective maneuvers represent offensive and defensive moves anchored in *today*, here, and now (what are the opportunities I want to leverage today, and what are the mistakes I need to fix or the urgent problems I have to solve). Developing super-flexible strategies is about having a portfolio of initiatives, spanning pre-emptive, protective, exploitive, and corrective moves, monitoring them on a regular basis, and more significantly, shifting gears between them.

3. When you discuss super-flexible strategies and “corrective maneuvering”, you provide the example of Steve Jobs and how he turned Apple around in the late 1990s, not by embarking on a grand strategy, but by concentrating on bite-sized and rapid rollouts of new products every 90 days—things he could fix. Isn’t this counter to what we teach our MBAs and leaders when we tout the benefits of a visionary leader?

Bite-sized rollouts are not sexy. They don’t make great headlines. One of the interesting facts about Steve Jobs is that he did have a big bang vision from day one—changing the way people interact with machines in an intuitive way. The execution of that vision, however, has entailed bite-sized action steps. These moves gave Apple the momentum, confidence, and foundation to move forward after Jobs took over the reins again in the late 1990s during a time when everyone thought that Apple was going out of business. In fact, most

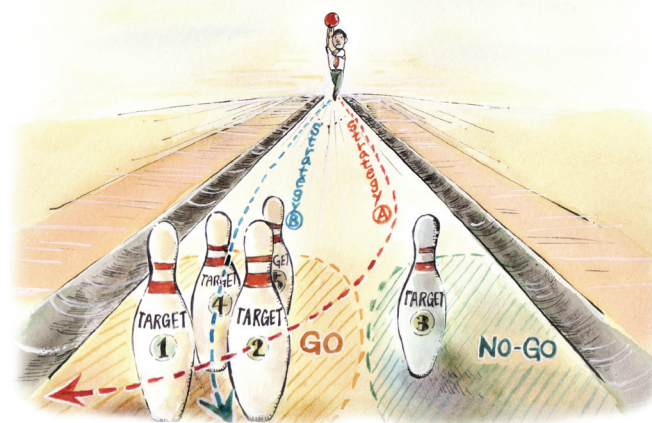
successful entrepreneurs we have observed in Silicon Valley have a big bang vision, but the implementation of that vision is done in bite-sized pieces.

4. “Recalibrating” is a third action principle of super-flexibility, one that you tie to execution. You present a “recalibration model” where you argue that recalibrating is a combination of deliberate intentions and emergent actions, meaning top down and bottoms-up. Can you talk more about this action principle?

We define super-flexible execution as the capacity to iterate and make real-time adjustments as new realities unfold. The “recalibration” framework explains how effective teams engage in action when they have limited information and face moving targets. It is similar to the scientific method of discovery; you articulate a clear thesis that can be rapidly tested through experimentation and prototyping. The critical success factor is the ability to modify, iterate, and adapt your approach. The title of our chapter on dynamic execution is “Don’t vacillate—iterate and recalibrate”.

The practical problem is that there is confusion between the two components of execution. The first component, the top-down piece, is about setting clear boundaries, or clarifying go/no-go areas. It’s about articulating a few guiding principles and a clear framework that

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can drive action. The second component is how you make it happen, or the bottoms-up part of execution. Knowledge workers need clear boundaries, but also a lot of autonomy in terms of making strategy happen. The worst-case scenario is when the top team confuses these two roles. They think they should define the boundaries *and* tell front-liners how to do it. Being micro-managed can be a real de-motivator for those who have to make things happen.

5. A super-flexible organisation is another essential component of the concept of super-flexibility. But you state that a super-flexible organisation is more than an organisation chart. Can you explain how?

Our organisational framework has three core building blocks—the anatomy (or the accountability structure and the org chart), the personality (or culture and identity), and the circulation (movement, interaction patterns, and information exchange). Importantly, the biggest challenge today revolves around “circulation”. Business leaders typically like to focus on the anatomy, or the org chart; they also like to focus on revitalizing the “culture” or the personality. We don’t see many leaders intentionally focus on circulation, or how people interact and exchange ideas, especially across silos. Yet, in a dynamic world, circulation is critical for success. It keeps teams aligned, creates a shared reality, and helps them move in the same direction.

Effective leaders are also versatile in using their “push-pull” capabilities, when to actively listen and when to direct and tell. They have self-insight and are honest about their skill gaps. They know how to deploy the capabilities of others to fill in their own shortcomings.

6. How might a super-flexible organisation balance stability and flexibility?

Don’t change your anatomy too often; it can be disruptive and unproductive. Be realistic about what it takes to change your personality or culture, because like human beings, organisational personalities don’t change that easily. What you can change is your “circulation”, in other words, your interaction patterns—what meetings you put on the calendar, for what purpose, who gets invited, what are the ground rules, how you give regular updates, how you resolve disagreements, how you access front-line input, how you facilitate collaboration amongst silos, and so on. Use your circulation as a way of instituting rapid changes that cumulatively can reinvent your organisation over time. Also, changes in circulation generate less resistance compared to the daunting task of overhauling anatomy or personality.

7. The last action principle you present in your book is related to super-flexible leadership—aligning knowledge work-

ers through peer-peer practices. Can you talk about this and how a super-flexible organisation would lead and treat knowledge workers?

The critical element of peer-peer leadership is clarity around the “non-negotiables”. These may reflect core values, critical priorities, or process norms. Effective leaders are also versatile in using their “push-pull” capabilities, when to actively listen and when to direct and tell. They can change hats and shift gears depending on the context. Most important of all, they have self-insight and are honest about their skill gaps. They know how to deploy the capabilities of others to fill in their own shortcomings.

8. Since this book is a second edition; have you seen examples of companies or organisations that have implemented your ideas and practices successfully and if yes, then how? On the other side, have you seen companies that have tried to implement your ideas and have had challenges? If so, how has this second

edition been revised/updated?

We don't presume to know better than business leaders who run their own companies. The extent to which companies successfully (or unsuccessfully) have implemented our ideas is hard to gauge. Our approach is novel in that we provide diagnostic frameworks rather than prescribe best practices or propose standard solutions. It is also difficult to assess how much success or failure can be attributed to our ideas. Business teams have used our frameworks to diagnose their strategies, team dynamics, organisational structure, execution processes, and leadership approaches. A global energy company, for example, has used one of our frameworks on the "role of corporate headquarters" (which is part of our super-flexible organisation chapter), to kick-start a discussion among their corporate staff units, including IT, HR, Health & Safety, etc. The goal is to start a cross-functional discussion, create a common vocabulary, and develop a sense of shared reality. Their target is to evolve the role of corporate staff units as they globalize their business footprint and make the units more flexible and responsive.

The new edition has been updated in several respects. The conceptual foundations have been significantly broadened. We have included several new examples. More importantly, we have tried to simplify the chapters and have tightened up the integration of the key conceptual frameworks so that they can work together as they are put into practice.

9. Is there a risk of super-flexibility that could potentially lead to chasing current real-time trends?

It is never easy to be behind the curve. In our book, we talk about this when we discuss super-flexible strategies and the action principle of maneuvering. Understanding real-time trends is important but not sufficient. It is like shifting gears when you drive a car. You can't just rely on one gear, or on your cruise control. You need your "reverse" gear to back out of a blind alley, and your first gear to climb up a steep hill. You need them all. It is no longer feasible to stay on cruise control. The challenge is to figure out which gear you need at which point in your business trajectory. We introduce the notion of "revision triggers" to distinguish between

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those events that make it necessary to spontaneously shift gears. Again, we don't presume to tell knowledge workers what to do; we give them the tools so they can diagnose and decide for themselves. As they say, we like to teach them how to fish, not catch the fish for them.

10. Is the book easily adapted to a formal training program or session to be implemented within a company to lead themselves?

We have been executive educators for many years, especially for large, established corporations that want to become flexible, agile, and dynamic. We have organised study tours of Silicon Valley for Boards and executive teams, facilitated alignment sessions for cross-functional teams, and designed learning initiatives for high potentials. During the past year, we have even organised "Bootcamps" for scientists and engineers who are first-time managers.

Over the years, we have woven many of these ideas into the fabric of our classes. Our graduate courses leverage the ideas to offer a range of specialized learning experiences; our elective courses include "organisational innovation", "high tech venturing", "enterprise innovation", "executive leadership", and "international business". We view the proposed frameworks as a "base platform" that can be leveraged to create targeted learning experiences for different audiences.

11. What are some current and future projects that you are working on?

We are currently working on how to turn these ideas into customized courses and executive seminars. Our goal is to help others use them as check-up and diagnostic tools. On the research side, Stuart is working on "enterprise resilience". The goal is to assess how companies can bounce back, after experiencing major crises. Homa's research is

focused on how "virtualization" impacts organisational design. In summary, we want to develop an integrated concept of super-flexibility and dig deeper into how an organisation can be stable and transform at the same time.

About the authors

Dr. Homa Bahrami is a Senior Lecturer at the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley, a Faculty Director at the Haas Center for Executive Education, and on the Board of the Haas Center for Teaching Excellence. She specializes in organisational innovation and enterprise adaptation in dynamic, knowledge-based industries. She has published widely in leading journals, is the co-author of a major textbook (with Harold Leavitt, Stanford University) "Managerial Psychology: Managing Behaviour in Organisations", published by the University of Chicago Press, and the co-author of "Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises" published by Springer in 2010. She serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and is active in executive education in the US and Europe.

Dr. Stuart Evans is a Distinguished Service Professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Silicon Valley, where he teaches "Innovation & Entrepreneurship". He is a board member, educator and author, focusing on dynamic high tech ventures. His professional career spans research (SRI International, Stanford Graduate School of Business), consulting (Bain and Company, Menlo Park, California), investing (Sand Hill Venture Group, Menlo Park, California) and executive management (Shugart Corporation, a Xerox subsidiary, Sunnyvale, California). He has published widely on strategic flexibility, serves on several boards in Silicon Valley and mentors high tech entrepreneurs. He is the co-author of "Super-flexibility for Knowledge Enterprises", published by Springer in 2010. **Reprint TEBR1011NDJF**

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